

Tracing the Cultural Tradition of Jangalmahal through *Bandna Parab* and *Jawa-Karam Parab*

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Abstract: The idea of the festival is related to human culture. People celebrate festivals to relax from the busy life schedule, and these festivals predominantly revolve around agricultural cycles and seasons. Does the festival create a space for a reversal of roles? In what ways, viewed through this prism of the festival, does the re-telling of the human-animal relationship occur? Is it just a show of mere gratitude or something more than that? Jangalmahal is the name given to Purulia, Bankura and West Midnapore districts of West Bengal and is a part of Chhotanagpur plateau. Bandna parab of Jangalmahal or, broadly, the Chhotanagpur plateau is a famous festival which celebrates the end of a hard-agricultural season. The celebration is principally for the cattle used during agriculture. Men play with animals, bathe together and worship them as their gods. This cattle festival illustrates the human-animal relationship and possible ethnographic reasons behind the festival when people first used animals in their agricultural work. It is a rerun of our entire prehistoric origins – the advent of agriculture, domestication of wild animals, grazing, and community life. Performing traditions of India are fundamentally mnemocultural where generationally imparted memories get articulated through embodiment and enactment. Indigenous belief and supernatural traditions are not just for the sustaining of culture, creed, and custom but simultaneously have deeper meanings toward all these. Why are people continuing these practices? What is the significance of such doings? There is an unknown and unexplored knowledge behind every indigenous belief, superstitions and supernatural traditions. This paper also aims to find out the beliefs and plausible meanings of the indigenous festival named Jawa-Karam parab in Purulia, Bengal. These performing traditions are medium through which culture and region articulate its distinctiveness and qualitative cultural singularity even today.

Keywords: Agriculture, *Bandna*, *Chhou*, Culture, Festival, Heritage, *Jawa*, *Karam*, Tradition

Introduction

Indigenous culture is the reverberator of a society, race, country and the overall progress of human civilisation. The growth of the common people is the real development of a nation. Festivals are very much interrelated to human culture. People celebrate festivals to get repose, relaxation from the busy life schedule, to enjoy the artistic aspects of life, to release repressed energies, to do something different from the mundane life. The Chhotanagpur region in eastern India has a distinct colour and culture, sight and sound, taste and tradition, life and livelihood.

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Like the circle of the seasons, they have a cycle of cultural practices which come and go all round the year. The festivals in Purulia, a city in the Chhotanagpur plateau in West Bengal is rich with myriad forms of cultural practices. The ample number of festivals celebrated in Bengal expressed aptly by a Bengali proverb, i.e., "*baro mase tero parbon*" meaning 'thirteen festivals in twelve months.' If we go deep and analyse these songs, dances, festivals then we would be able to see how close the people are to nature, how they live with nature, how they share their feelings with the animals and plants, how grateful they are toward these plants and animals. In this connection, the observations of W.W. Hunter (1868) about the region in his famous book "*The Annals of Rural Bengal*" are worth mentioning.

I have endeavoured to delineate the inner life of those distant Asiatic nations over whom a branch of the Anglo-Saxon Family has been called to rule. Separated from us by half a world, their vicissitudes, social necessities, and religious cravings are nevertheless pregnant with interest to all who would contemplate the picturesque yet painful stages, through which lies man's route from barbarism to civilisation and assured faith. The grand problems of life are everywhere the same. It is the solution of them that races differ. (p. 12)

Jangalmahal, a district in West Bengal, has a variety of cultures, and has many festivals throughout the year. Most of the celebrations are more or less related to agriculture. Every festival has different genealogies and rituals. The spirit of indigenous culture is to retain and rerun the tradition. In this paper, I will be dealing with *Bandna* and *Jawa-Karam* festival to trace, revisit and rearticulate the cultural cosmos of this area. An attempt has also been made to connect rituals with the performance of the area. The most popular performance of the region is the Chhou dance performance which is now listed among the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO since 2010. One of the aims of this paper is to show how rituals are incorporated and accommodated into the Chhou dance performances. The Chhou dance not only includes stories from the Indian epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and Puranas but also addresses sociopolitical issues, and thus creates a space for the age-old rituals and contemporary problems simultaneously.

Bandna Festival

Bandna is a widely celebrated festival of Chhotanagpur plateau of Eastern India which covers much of Jharkhand and some parts of West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Bihar. The festival is all about celebrating the winding up of hard agricultural work with animals used at the time of cultivation. The festival is also known by several other names which include *sohorai*, *badhna*, *gohail puja* to name a few. The most popular name for this festival is *Bandna*, a word which carries the meaning of this festival and will be discussed in detail in the subsequent part of this paper. This festival is deeply associated with agriculture like all the other festivals of the region. Animals like cow and buffalo used during farming are at the central position of the festival. These animals' power is mostly used during the agriculture, but the usage is not confined to agriculture alone. When there was no vehicle, carts were drawn by bullocks and other animals. Bullock carts and other such animal-drawn vehicles were used for general transportation as well. Animal power is still used in agriculture. The appropriation of animal power in other sectors of life has considerably decreased due to the availability of modern machines and vehicles. These domestic animals are always given special treatment and

considered as part of the family in the area. Some families prepare special food for the animals. The kind of human-animal relationship that exists in the Chhotanagpur region can be observed and perceived well in the *Bandna* celebration. This is a fascinating festival where men share everything with the animals. Men play with animals, bathe together and worship them as their gods. This cattle festival shows the man-animal relationship and illustrates the moment when men first used animals in their agricultural work and tells us about the tricks taming wild animals. How did the wild animals become domesticated? How did men produce their livelihood at the beginning of human civilisation? How did men start reducing their challenging tasks using their brains? All these are demonstrated during the festival.

The animals used in agriculture are worshipped during the *Bandna* celebration. The animals are fastened with a strong thick rope to a wooden pole which is implanted into the ground. This fastening of animal is the most exciting and vital part of the festival. The act of fastening has a prehistoric significance to the human civilisation; this clasp is locally known as *gorukhunta* (when fastening a bull) or *karakhunta* (when fastening a buffalo). The Sanskrit word *bandana* (worship) or *bandhan* which seems to be the origin of the name *Bandna* literally means 'to fasten'. This fastening is a significant part of the festival. Another substantial and pragmatic point of the festival is the renovation and repair of the mud houses which can directly be connected to the mythology behind the celebration of the *Bandna* festival. According to the local beliefs, in the ancient period when human civilisation was in its very formative stage, Lord Shiva used to provide food for a long time. When the number of humans multiplied, He advised human beings to produce their food through cultivation. In this period, people used to produce their food by their own effort but later they realised that the work of farming is too hard to do, so they requested Him for assistance. Then Lord Shiva provided some cattle on the condition that they would take care of the animals. In the beginning, the relationship between humans and animals was good, but with the passage of time, it degraded, and the animals were subjected to cruelty. When the animals couldn't endure the amount of pain inflicted by men they complained to Lord Shiva who then secretly decided to come to the earth on the new moon in the month of Kartik to see the condition of the animals. Narada gave this news to the humans, and then the intelligent men started clearing the courtyard, their houses, and the cowsheds. This is the time when people of the region repair and renovate their mud houses with several types of soils. Two-three layers of diverse kinds of soils are applied to the wall, and finally, walls are colored with natural colours directly extracted from natural elements. The courtyard and walls are painted with a kind of painting which is the peculiarity of this celebration. The appearance of the mud houses after repairing and renovation would be incomplete without the following images.

Figure 1: Renovation of the mud wall (Mandal, 2016, October 25).



Figure 2: Wall Painting of Bandna Festival (Patra, 2014, November 13).



Figure 3: Floor Painting of Bandna Festival (Mandal, 2015, December 7).



Figure 4: (Mandal, 2017, October 15). Wall Painting of Bandna Festival.



Before the day of *amabashya* (new moon), men start washing their animals and smearing oil and vermillion on their horns and foreheads providing enough grass and diwa (earthen lamp) in the dwelling place of the animals throughout the night. The day after the new moon, Lord Shiva saw that men were worshipping the animals with different offerings and sacrifice

and that the next day animals were playing with humans accompanied by various musical instruments with *ahira* songs. Therefore, the complaint against men couldn't be proved. The following year also, the same claim was made, and the same procedure was followed, and thus the *Bandna parab* continues to retain its tradition

Jawa-Karam Parab:

This part of the paper aims to find out the views and plausible meanings of an indigenous festival named *Jawa-Karam parab* in Purulia, Bengal. The festival is a kind of training of motherhood for unmarried girls who are the future mothers in the form of an indigenous celebration. These maidens are ingrained with motherly affection and conduct through *Jawa* and *Karam* festivals of Purulia. Songs are an integral part of the native celebration, and this *Jawa* festival is no exception. All these indigenous performing traditions are primarily mnemoculture, i.e., cultures of body and memory. Here the importance is given to the body to articulate generationally imparted knowledge. Now let us see what happens when *Jawa* and *Karam* festivals are celebrated in Purulia.

Jawa geet, performed by women, is an essential part of the festival. This festival takes place in the Bengali month of *bhadro* (mid-August to mid-September). Though *Jawa* is a ritual in Purulia, the celebration is an indigenous process to examine the germination power of seeds; seeds are examined before being sowed in the field. Unmarried girls celebrate this festival eleven days before another local festival named *Karam*. Girls plant different sorts of seeds in bamboo baskets; sand, soil, turmeric powder, oil, etc. are put in the bucket (local name for this bamboo basket is '*tupa*'). Those who plant these *Jawa/Jawa pata* have several social customs, practices, and rituals. There are six different types of *Jawa* having six different purposes viz. 1. *Sanchi Jawa*, 2. *Machhi Jawa*, 3. *Raja Jawa*, 4. *Bon Jawa* and 5. *Bagal Jawa*. 6. *Goram Jawa*

Bon (forest) *Jawa* should be left in the woods only. *Goram Jawa* should be kept near the village deity named *goram than*. *Bagal Jawa* should be kept in the area where cows and bulls rest after grazing named *bathan* or *gotthoir*. *Raja Jawa* is meant for would-be husband of the maidens, and *Sanchi Jawa* is for the God *Karam/Dharma devata*. I have tried to find out the prohibitions and meanings of such practice in this part of the paper. There are some prohibitions for girls participating in the festival, and the *Jawa* is produced out of 11 different seeds. On the 11th day of the lunar cycle (*ekadasi, shukla paksha*), they worship the *Karam God*.

1. From the very beginning day of *Jawa*, they should not sleep on cot/ bedstead. If they do so, their *Jawa* or saplings will grow in a bending position.
2. Girls should not take a bathe bending heads backwardly or else their *Jawa* could collapse to a landslide.
3. They should not eat any burnt things because sunshine might tingle their *Jawa*.
4. They should not eat leaves because their *Jawa* might get grassier.
5. If a *Jawa* participant requires salt while having a meal, she should not take the salt on her own hand; someone in the family puts the salt in her food. She should not touch the salt directly. The *Jawa* participants believe that if they touch salt, then their *Jawa* might get melt.
6. They do not eat sweet things as they attract ants. They think so because it increases glucose in the body and at the time of death, the body will be surrounded by lots of

- ants in case of the late funeral process.
7. They do not defecate in a wet place because in that case, a kind of worm (*gobor poka*/cow dung worm) in the soil might fortify soil on that area.
 8. Urination in a standing position is prohibited to them as it creates a hole in the earth. If they do so, then *Jawa* might get affected and fall.
 9. Eating curd is also prohibited because they think that it produces fungus in their *Jawa*.
- Following are some of the images where unmarried girls are celebrating the *Jawa* festival

Figure 5: Children learning Jawa songs (Mandal, 2015, September 25).



Figure 6: Unmarried girls singing and dancing encircling the Jawa Idol (Mandal, 2016, September 19)

Figure 7: Unmarried girls learning Jawa songs from aged women (Mandal, 2014, September 5).





It is implicated that the girls should know all these rules like the back of their hands. This is a kind of self-training of the girls who are yet to marry. All these restrictions apply to a mother to keep her baby healthy. This is not just a practice, and a mere ritual, but a way of transferring knowledge generationally.

Karam:

Jawa parab is followed by *Karam puja* (worship). In the time of *Karam puja*, girls make a baby boy of cucumber, but they never make a baby girl. If a girl's marriage is fixed, then all the material of *Karam puja* will come from the in-law's house since this is going to be the last *Karam puja* for her. Every festival has different genealogies and rituals. Most of the celebrations are associated with agriculture. This *Jawa-Karam* ritual is incorporated into one of the *Chhou palas* (episode). *Chhou* dance is essentially a dance drama where stories are usually choreographed from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and *Puranas*. The theme of this dance is not limited to these epics and *Puranas* only but have incorporated socio-political, historical and contemporary events and issues as well. A contemporary *Chhou* episode named *Kurmi Somaje Bhaigna Purohit* (Sister's son is the priest in Kudmi community) has incorporated this *Jawa-Karam* ritual in the *Chhou* dance performance as part of the various performing traditions of this community. These rituals are not peculiar and performed by a singular community only but performed and observed by almost all communities inhabiting the Chhotanagpur region. Heterogeneous communities come together and generate such cultural forms. D. Venkat Rao (2014) in his book *Cultures of Memory in South Asia* has rightly pointed out the significance of performing traditions and the very basic nature of mnemocultural circulation

and proliferation as:

When mnemocultural speech and gestural acts name and demarcate elements and entities, the very modes of utterance and the diverse forms of address that disperse from these cultures of memory require attention. Their archivability and representability cannot be reduced; but the fact that the mnemocultural traditions made such possibilities of reproducibility entirely contingent upon the acts/articulations of the body marks the singular difference of mnemocultures. The centrality of the body here must not be measured in terms of the content of these compositions of image, music, text – but in the very performativity of the body symbol in each instance. Mnemocultures circulate and proliferate through performative reiterations and not by way of archival accumulations and representations. (p. 56)

Mnemoculture which connotes “cultures of memory” manifests through such paintings, rituals, song cultures and performances. Ritual and performance in the context of Indian cultural heritage, in general, cannot be rigidly separated from one another. In case of the above-mentioned festivals, the rituals take the form of performances which are ‘performer-oriented’ in nature, that is to say, the audience is secondary, unlike the ‘other-oriented’ performances. Thus, we can see that the mnemocultural impulse cannot be replaced and obliterated entirely and they continue to exist despite the digital dominance in today’s world. The primordial communication system, i.e. speech and gesture in the form of image, text, music, and performance are still considerably prevalent to communicate with the memories imparted generation after generation. Ritualistic performance is one such instance where memory gets articulated through bodily engagement. Consequently, it can be said that performing traditions are equally crucial to the inscriptional culture. Cultural traditions of Purulia can prove that writing is not superior; rituals and performative traditions are similarly important. Performing traditions of Purulia are one of the examples of guardians of a culture’s memory.

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